DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 320 393 FL 018 468

AUTHOR Winfield, Marie Yolette
TITLE Fundamentally Speaking: A Focus on English as a Second Language (ESL).
PUB DATE Oct 89
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Students; Classroom Techniques; Educational Strategies; *English (Second Language); Grading; *Language Skills; Language Teachers; Learning Strategies; *Limited English Speaking; *Oral Language; Second Language Instruction; Second Language Learning; Skill Development; *Teaching Methods; *Written Language

ABSTRACT

The techniques used in teaching spoken and written English must be re-evaluated, and more effort should be directed toward helping individuals develop adequate ways of acquiring language skills. Classroom models that confront students with texts they cannot read effectively, and that compel them to repeat words and sentences in a chorus should be done away with. With this technique, students cannot hear themselves and are unlikely to hear one another. Individual assessment also becomes impossible. Teachers must be provided with adequate training support and must learn to be sensitive to cultural issues. English-as-a-Second-Language teachers must become basic skills teachers. An effective instructional approach to language should: (1) allow the learner to learn quickly, while enjoying the learning process; (2) create an atmosphere conducive to full learner participation; (3) provide sufficient intellectual challenge; (4) move from the known to the unknown, concept to element, immediate to remote, simple to more complex, and concrete to abstract; (5) encourage genuine exchanges between students and teachers; (6) develop fertile ground for reading and writing skill acquisition; and (7) promote learning by giving the learner a sense of responsibility and empowerment. (MSE)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

ED320393

# FUNDAMENTALLY SPEAKING
## A FOCUS ON ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL)

By: Marie Yolette Winfield
Training and Educational Consultant
Winfield Consulting Associates

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

M.Y. Winfield

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

October 1989

FL 018 408

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

## ABSTRACT

This article is a reflection on English as a Second Language learning. Its purpose is two-fold: a) To raise important systemic issues, in regard to English as a Second Language learning acquisition, approach, and methods; b) To offer a methodological challenge to administrators and teachers of ESL instructional programs.

"Fundamentally Speaking" is concrete, down-to-earth, and methodical. It is written in very simple terms, and important points, in some cases, are discussed in great details. When appropriate, anecdotal accounts of personal experiences and concrete examples are used, to illustrate that which is abstract and theoretical.

This paper also includes very specific suggestions, which can serve as a basis for reform in English as a Second Language programs.

Given that many non-English speakers speak two or more languages, the expression English as a Second Language--although, practically relevant, for all intent and purpose--is in a sense a misnomer. And in reality, among most recent immigrant populations English is not generally spoken in the home, which would strongly reinforce its acquisition as a Second Language. Similarly, the inexactness of the term Limited English Proficiency can be demonstrated in many cases. When you say to someone, "Hi. How are you?" and the response comes in way of a smile, then you know that you are not dealing with a person with limited proficiency in English, but with a non-proficient English speaker.

In the preceding example we saw the interlocutor's reaction when a language was introduced which was foreign to him. Foreign as in: "Characteristic of, or from a country other than one's own; Outside of a scope, range, or essential nature." (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language.) This argument may sound rhetorical. However, it is meant to highlight the crucial fact that the institutionalization of ESL may be, to some degree, conceptually wrong.

**"FUNDAMENTALLY SPEAKING"**

---

**SAME/BUT NOT EQUAL** - (The Two Major Forms of Language)
If we want to make positive changes in the way we teach the English language to foreigners, we must go back to what is basic and fundamental. While our goal may be to institutionalize English as a Second Language, our effort should focus on what it means to the learner. And in this case, basics are fundamental.

Discussions regarding ESL instruction continue to center around techniques for teaching English to those who show lower grades in reading and writing--the so-called "grades zero through four groups." I have been asked many times by others in the field, "How do you teach English to people who cannot read at the first grade level?"

Firstly, I think in the case of adult learners, this "grade zero" categorization, not only misrepresents a person's background, but also insults that person's character. The term "grade zero" implies that an individual--at a particular point in his/her life--may possess zero skill and knowledge.

**"FUNDAMENTALLY SPEAKING"**

---

And now that many universities and colleges do give credits for life experiences, it is about time that we come up with a better and more appropriate system for grading adults.

Secondly, there is a line to be drawn between spoken (speaking) and written language acquisition (reading and writing). Language, reading and writing being all fundamental (meaning elemental and basic), and instrumental skills (they are used in the acquisition of other skills), a GLOBAL instructional approach, in those areas, remains the best. (Exceptions can be made in language art and conversational English.) However, while they are interdependent, they are not inextricably inter-related. In other words, one needs not know how to read and write in order to learn how to speak. Successful language acquisition depends on an individual's ability to learn, the quality of the teaching and learning process, and the learning environment, more so than on whether or not an individual is able to read and write.

**"FUNDAMENTALLY SPEAKING"**

---

"Spoken Language" can be defined as the function of emitting meaningful sounds, in the contexts of specific situations. Successful spoken language acquisition can only be achieved in three distinct steps: 1) to audibly discriminate (by listening skillfully to the emitter); 2) to comprehend (by being able to conceptualize, either by making a connotative reference to what is already known, or through the use of the imagination); 3) to pronounce (by actively practicing the newly acquired skills).

Language is functional in a nature, i.e., it is closely attached to its primary function which is to communicate. It is learned through practice, and not from textbooks. Individuals in most cultures regularly face a linguistic dichotomy, and in some cases, a trichotomy (when two or three languages compete for fluency in a certain sociological context). And yet, learners (self-asserted, under those circumstances) take responsibility for their own selection of skill acquisition, learning method, and follow-up. (As is seen in early language development acquisition.) Should we not be able to duplicate this process, and even be more successful at it in our adulthood? We may reach our goal

faster and more smoothly by letting the learner become a co-driver on the road to his own destiny.

When my three year-old says, "Daddy's gone to work," or "I'm tired and sleepy," he is not concerned with phonics, syntax, or decoding. He simply uses verbalization as a vehicle to practice, and body language to emulate what he had internalized, over time, from observation, listening and intuition. I believe that those basic principles of natural language development, which are evident in early childhood, are still active and continue to play a major role in the acquisition of a new language well into adulthood.

**MEANINGFUL ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILL ACQUISITION**

I remember being engaged in some very intense discussions by my ESL staff, when I advance the following theory in my training sessions.

A. The use of an "Active and Conceptual" approach to spoken language instruction would render the utilization of textbooks and written exams obsolete.

B. Textbooks and written examinations would appropriately take their place during reading time, and

should not be used as an end, but as a means to an end. (Therefore, regular textbooks can be substituted by other forms of written materials, from time to time--teacher-prepared texts are especially recommendable.)

C. This process would then culminate into writing exercises.

D. This method carries the double advantage of cementing skills and concepts through a process of reinforcement.

For example, because what I had learned in school was the written form of the English language (textbooks were used as a pivotal tool), I could read and write in English long before I could carry on a conversation. Again going back to our so-called "zero through four groups" it is hard enough for adults to ask for help with elementary education. It is even more inhibiting when they are handed an instrument--in this case a book--with which they are very much unfamiliar. And in the case of children: You try to read something that you do not understand; you may as well call it decoding instead of reading.

## "FUNDAMENTALLY SPEAKING"

As a non-native speaker of the English language, I started out to learn English in a small volunteer-based program. But with a background in education and experience as a teacher, I quickly realized that what I was getting was not going to get me very far. (At least not as far as I wanted to go.) I dropped out of that program and ended up in a paid program. I should, however, add that what allowed me to acquire enough skills to communicate effectively, was not the fact that I paid, but my "learning skills."

Some might ask how long ago that was. Frankly, It was not such a long time ago. I am still often reminded of my vulnerabilities as an immigrant by those who point to my accent from time to time. Nevertheless, I am not a typical case. Therefore, my question is, what about those who rely on us to make this kind of decision for them?

If we were to really evaluate the outcome of English as a Second Language learning, on a long-term basis, my guess is that the results, perhaps, could be successfully summarized as follows: A limited number of individuals have acquired enough skill and proficiency in the English language to

pursue an education, advance in employment, achieve personal goals, or excel in the workplace.

Through my work as a multi-cultural educator, I have had many opportunities to talk to groups and individual school children and adult learners. The most common complain among bilingual school children is that it takes them too long to learn the English language. (And as a matter of course, they associate this, which they perceive to be a failure, to the length of time they spend in bilingual education.) Among adults, however, the greatest concern is usually expressed in terms of the difficulties with learning English.

**WHAT CAN BE DONE**

Once these facts become clear and accepted, the next step is to re-evaluate the techniques that are being employed in the instruction of spoken and written English. We also need to direct our efforts toward the development of more adequate methods in the acquisition of language skills.

We must do away with classroom models which confront clusters of students with texts that they cannot read effectively,

and compel them to repeat words and sentences over and over again in a chorus. In this manner, they are unable to hear themselves, nor are they likely to hear one another. This practice also makes it impossible for the teacher to assess and correct individual student's pronunciation. Likewise, teachers must be provided with adequate training support, and sensitized on the issues of acculturation and multi-culture. And last, but not least, we must conduct objective on-going process evaluations of programs.

ESL teachers must become "BASIC SKILLS" teachers. "Basic" as in fundamental. And since we have identified language, reading and writing as two fundamental components of language, they must be made an integrated part of the language unit. In the case of advanced students, conversational English can be set up as a distinct form of English language instructional program. Subsequently, reading and writing should be understood to represent building and enrichment exercises, which aim at developing vocabulary and grammatical correctness.

**"FUNDAMENTALLY SPEAKING"**

---

An effective instructional approach to language should do the following:

1.. Allow the learner to learn quickly--based on his own ability--while, at the same time, enjoying the learning process.

2. Create an active learning atmosphere, conducive to full participation by the learner.

3. Provide sufficient intellectual challenge and mental stimulation.

4. Depart from the known to the unknown; from the concept to the element; from the immediate to the remote; from that which is simple to the more complex; and finally, from the concrete to the abstract.

5. Encourage genuine exchanges between students and teachers.

6. Develop fertile grounds for reading and writing skill acquisition.

7. Promote learning by giving the learner a sense of responsibility, as well as empowerment; teaching the learner the necessary skill to make informed learning decisions; and allowing the development of a <u>positive attitude toward learning in general.</u>